

The Film Mystery

By

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1. A Camera Crime

"Camera!"

Kennedy and I had been hastily summoned from his laboratory in the city by District-Attorney Mackay, and now stood in the luxurious, ornate library in the country home of Emery Phelps, the banker, at Tarrytown.

"Camera!--you know the call when the director is ready to shoot a scene of a picture?--well--at the moment it was given and the first and second camera men began to grind--she crumpled--sank to the floor--unconscious!"

Hot and excited, Mackay endeavored to reenact his case for us with all the histrionic ability of a popular prosecutor before a jury.

"There's where she dropped--they carried her over here to this davenport--sent for Doctor Blake--but he couldn't do a thing for her. She died--just as you see her. Blake thought the matter so serious, so alarming, that he advised an immediate investigation. That's why I called you so urgently."

Before us lay the body of the girl, remarkably beautiful even as she lay motionless in death. Her masses of golden hair, disheveled, added to the soft contours of her features. Her wonderfully large blue-gray eyes with their rare gift for delicate shades of expression were closed, but long curling lashes swept her cheeks still and it was hard to believe that this was anything more than sleep.

It was inconceivable that Stella Lamar, idol of the screen, beloved of millions, could have been taken from the world which worshiped her.

I felt keenly for the district attorney. He was a portly little man of the sort prone to emphasize his own importance and so, true to type, he had been upset completely by a case of genuine magnitude. It was as though visiting royalty had dropped dead within his jurisdiction.

I doubt whether the assassination of a McKinley or a Lincoln could have unsettled him as much, because in such an event he would have had the whole weight of the Federal government behind him. There was no question but that Stella Lamar enjoyed a country-wide popularity known by few of our Presidents. Her sudden death was a national tragedy.

Apparently Mackay had appealed to Kennedy the moment he learned the identity of Stella, the moment he realized there was any question about the circumstances

surrounding the affair. Over the telephone the little man had been almost incoherent. He had heard of Kennedy's work and was feverishly anxious to enlist his aid, at any price.

All we knew as we took the train on the New York Central was that Stella was playing a part in a picture to be called "The Black Terror," that the producer was Manton Pictures, Incorporated, and that she had dropped dead suddenly and without warning in the middle of a scene being photographed in the library at the home of Emery Phelps.

I was singularly elated at the thought of accompanying Kennedy on this particular case. It was not that the tragic end of a film star whose work I had learned to love was not horrible to me, but rather because, for once, I thought Kennedy actually confronted a situation where his knowledge of a given angle of life was hardly sufficient for his usual analysis of the facts involved.

"Walter," he had exclaimed, as I burst into the laboratory in response to a hurried message, "here's where I need your help. You know all about moving pictures, so--if you'll phone your city editor and ask him to let you cover a case for the Star we'll just about catch a train at One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street."

Because the film world had fascinated me always I had made a point of being posted on its people and their activities. I remembered the very first appearance of Stella Lamar back in the days of General Film, when pictures were either Licensed or Independent, when only two companies manufactured worth-while screen dramas, when any subject longer than a reel had to be of rare excellence, such as the art films imported from France for the Licensed program. In those days, Stella rose rapidly to prominence. Her large wistful eyes had set the hearts of many of us to beating at staccato rate.

Then came Lloyd Manton, her present manager, and the first of a new type of business man to enter the picture field. Manton was essentially a promoter. His predecessors had been men carried to success by the growth of the new art. Old Pop Belman, for instance, had been a fifth-rate oculist who rented and sold stereopticons as a side line. With blind luck he had grasped the possibilities of Edison's new invention. Just before the break-up of General Film he had become many times a millionaire and it was then that he had sent a wave of laughter over the entire country by an actual cable to William Shakespeare, address London, asking for all screen rights to the plays written by that gentleman.

Manton represented a secondary phase in film finance. Continent Films, his first corporation, was a stockjobbing concern. Grasping the immense popularity of Stella Lamar, he had coaxed her away from the old studio out in Flatbush where all her early successes had been photographed. With the magic of her name he sold thousands of shares of stock to a public already fed up on the stories of the fortunes to be made in moving pictures. When much of the money so raised had been dissipated, when Continent's quotation on the curb sank to an infinitesimal fraction, then it developed that Stella's contract was with Manton personally. Manton Pictures, Incorporated, was formed to exploit her. The stock of this company was not offered to outside investors.

Stella's popularity had in no way suffered from the business methods of her manager. Manton, at the least, had displayed rare foresight in his estimation of public taste. Except for a few attempts with established stage favorites, photographed generally in screen versions of theatrical classics and backed by affiliations with the producers of the legitimate stage, Continent Films was the first concern to make the five-reel feature. Stella, as a Continent player, was the very first feature star. Under the banner of Manton Pictures, she had never surrendered her position of pre-eminence.

Also, scandal somehow had failed to touch her. Those initiated to the inner gossip of the film world, like myself, were under no illusions. The relations between Stella and Manton were an open secret. Yet the picture fans, in their blind worship, believed her to be as they saw her upon the screen. To them the wide and wistful innocence of her remarkably large eyes could not be anything but genuine. The artlessness of the soft curves of her mouth was proof to them of the reality of an ingenuous and very girlish personality.

Even her divorce had helped rather than harmed her. It seemed irony to me that she should have obtained the decree instead of her husband, and in New York, too, where the only grounds are unfaithfulness. The testimony in the case had been sealed so that no one knew whom she had named as corespondent. At the time, I wondered what pressure had been exerted upon Millard to prevent the filing of a cross suit. Surely he should have been able to substantiate the rumors of her association with Lloyd Manton.

Lawrence Millard, author and playwright and finally scenario writer, had been as much responsible for the success of his wife as Manton, and in a much less spectacular way. It was Millard who had written her first great Continent success, who had developed the peculiar type of story best suited for her, back in the early days of the one reel and General Film.

It is commonly known in picture circles that an actress who screens well, even if she is only a moderately good artist, can be made a star with one or two or three good stories and that, conversely, a star may be ruined by a succession of badly written or badly produced vehicles. Those of us not blinded by an idolatrous worship for the girl condemned her severely for throwing her husband aside at the height of her success. The public displayed their sympathy for her by a burst of renewed interest. The receipts at the box office whenever her films were shown probably delighted both Manton and Stella herself.

I had wondered, as Kennedy and I occupied a seat in the train, and as he left me to my thoughts, whether there could be any connection between the tragedy and the divorce. The decree, I knew, was not yet final. Could it be possible that Millard was unwilling, after all, to surrender her? Could he prefer deliberate murder to granting her her freedom? I was compelled to drop that line of thought, since it offered no explanation of his previous failure to contest her suit or to start counter action.

Then my reflections had strayed away from Kennedy's sphere, the solving of the mystery, to my own, the news value of her death and the events following. The Star, as always,

had been only too glad to assign me to any case where Craig Kennedy was concerned; my phone message to the city editor, the first intimation to any New York paper of Stella's death, already had resulted without doubt in scare heads and an extra edition.

The thought of the prominence given the personal affairs of picture players and theatrical folk had disgusted me.

There are stars against whom there is not the slightest breath of gossip, even among the studio scandal-mongers. Any number of girls and men go about their work sanely and seriously, concerned in nothing but their success and the pursuit of normal pleasures. As a matter of fact it had struck me on the train that this was about the first time Craig Kennedy had ever been called in upon a case even remotely connected with the picture field. I knew he would be confronted with a tangled skein of idle talk, from everybody, about everybody, and mostly without justification. I hoped he would not fall into the popular error of assuming all film players bad, all studios schools of immorality. I was glad I was able to accompany him on that account.

The arrival at Tarrytown had ended my reflections, and Kennedy's --whatever they may have been. Mackay himself had met us at the station and with a few words, to cover his nervousness, had whisked us out to the house.

As we approached, Kennedy had taken quick note of the surroundings, the location of the home itself, the arrangement of the grounds. There was a spreading lawn on all four sides, unbroken by plant or bush or tree--sheer prodigality of space, the better to display a rambling but most artistic pile of gray granite. Masking the road and the adjoining grounds was thick, impenetrable shrubbery, a ring of miniature forest land about the estate. There was a garage, set back, and tennis courts, and a practice golf green. In the center of a garden in a far corner a summerhouse was placed so as to reflect itself in the surface of a glistening swimming pool.

As we pulled up under the porte-cochere Emery Phelps, the banker, greeted us. Perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed to me that there was a repressed animosity in his manner, as though he resented the intrusion of Kennedy and myself, yet felt powerless to prevent it. In contrast to his manner was the cordiality of Lloyd Manton, just inside the door. Manton was childishly eager in his welcome, so much so that I was able to detect a shade of suspicion in Kennedy's face.

The others of the company were clustered in the living room, through which we passed to reach the library. I found small opportunity to study them in the rather dim light. Mackay beckoned to a man standing in a window, presenting him to Kennedy as Doctor Blake. Then we entered the long paneled chamber which had been the scene of the tragedy.

Now I stood, rather awed, with the motionless figure of Stella Lamar before me in her last pitiable close-up. For I have never lost the sense of solemnity on entering the room of a tragedy, in spite of the long association I have had with Kennedy in the scientific detection of crime. Particularly did I have the feeling in this case. The death of a man is

tragic, but I know nothing more affecting than the sudden and violent death of a beautiful woman--unless it be that of a child.

I recalled a glimpse of Stella as I had seen her in her most recent release, as the diaphragm opened on her receiving a box of chocolates, sent by her lover, and playfully feeding one of them to her beautiful collie, "Laddie," as he romped about upon a divan and almost smothered her with affection. The vivacity and charm of the scene were in sad contrast with what lay before me.

As I looked more carefully I saw now that her full, well-rounded face was contorted with either pain or fear--perhaps both. Even through the make-up one could see that her face was blotched and swollen. Also, the muscles were contorted; the eyes looked as if they might be bulging under the lids; and there was a bluish tinge to her skin. Evidently death had come quickly, but it had not been painless.

"Even the coroner has not disturbed the body," Mackay hastened to explain to Kennedy. "The players, the camera men, all were sent out of the room the moment Doctor Blake was certain something more than a natural cause lay behind her death. Mr. Phelps telephoned to me, and upon my arrival I ordered the doors and windows closed, posted my deputies to prevent any interference with anything in the room, left my instructions that everyone was to be detained, then got in touch with you as quickly as I could."

Kennedy turned to him. Something in the tone of his voice showed that he meant his compliment. "I'm glad, Mackay, to be called in by some one who knows enough not to destroy evidence; who realizes that perhaps the slightest disarrangement of a rug, for instance, may be the only clue to a murder. It's--it's rare!"

The little district attorney beamed. If he had found it necessary to walk across the floor just then he would have strutted. I smiled because I wanted Kennedy to show again his marvelous skill in tracing a crime to its perpetrator. I was anxious that nothing should be done to hamper him.

2. The Tiny Scratch

Kennedy, before his own examination of the body, turned to Doctor Blake. "Tell me just what you found when you arrived," he directed.

The physician, whose practice embraced most of the wealthy families in and around Tarrytown, was an unusually tall, iron- gray-haired man of evident competency. It was very plain that he resented his unavoidable connection with the case.

"She was still alive," he responded, thoughtfully, "although breathing with difficulty. Nearly everyone had clustered about her, so that she was getting little air, and the room was stuffy from the lights they had been using in taking the scene. They told me she dropped unconscious and that they couldn't revive her, but at first it did not occur to me that it might be serious. I thought perhaps the heat--"

"You saw nothing suspicious," interrupted Kennedy, "nothing in the actions or manner of anyone in the room?"

"No, when I first entered I didn't suspect anything out of the way. I had them send everyone into the next room, except Manton and Phelps, and had the doors and windows thrown open to give her air. Then when I examined her I detected what seemed to me to be both a muscular and nervous paralysis, which by that time had proceeded pretty far. As I touched her she opened her eyes, but she was unable to speak. She was breathing with difficulty; her heart action was weakening so rapidly that I had little opportunity to apply restorative measures."

"What do you think caused the death?"

"So far, I can make no satisfactory explanation." The doctor shrugged his shoulders very slightly. "That is why I advised an immediate investigation. I did not care to write a death certificate."

"You have no hypothesis?"

"If she died from any natural organic disorder, the signs were lacking by which I could trace it. Everything indicates the opposite, however. It would be hard for me to say whether the paralysis of respiration or of the heart actually caused her death. If it was due to poison--Well, to me the whole affair is shrouded in mystery. The symptoms indicated nothing I could recognize with any degree of certainty."

Kennedy stooped over, making a superficial examination of the girl. I saw that some faint odor caught his nostrils, for he remained poised a moment, inhaling reflectively, his eyes clouded in thought. Then he went to the windows, raising the shades an additional few inches each, but that did not seem to give him the light he wished.

In the room were the portable arcs used in the making of scenes in an actual interior setting. The connections ran to heavy insulated junction boxes at the ends of two lines of stiff black stage cable. Near the door the circuits were joined and a single lead of the big duplex cord ran out along the polished hardwood floor, carried presumably to the house circuit at a fuse box where sufficient amperage was available. Kennedy's eyes followed out the wires quickly. Then, motioning to me to help, he wheeled one of the heavy stands around and adjusted the hood so that the full strength of the light would be cast upon Stella. The arc in place, he threw the switch, and in the sputtering flood of illumination dropped to his knees, taking a powerful pocket lens from his waistcoat and beginning an inch by inch examination of her skin.

I gained a fresh realization of the beauty of the star as she lay under the dazzling electric glow, and in particular I noticed the small amount of make-up she had used and the natural firmness of her flesh. She was dressed in a modish, informal dinner dress, of embroidered satin, cut fairly low at front and back and with sleeves of some gauzelike material reaching not halfway to her elbow, hardly sleeves at all, in fact.

Kennedy with his glass went over her features with extreme care. I saw that he drew her hair back, and that then he parted it, to examine her scalp, and I wondered what infinitesimal clue might be the object of his search. I had learned, however, never to question him while he was at work.

With his eye glued to his lens he made his way about and around her neck, and down and over her throat and chest so far as it remained unprotected by the silk of her gown. With the aid of Mackay he turned her over to examine her back. Next he returned the body to its former position and began to inspect the arms. Very suddenly something caught his eye on the inside of her right forearm. He grunted with satisfaction, straightened, pulled the switch of the arc, wiped his eyes, which were watering.

"Find anything, Mr. Kennedy?" Doctor Blake seemed to understand, to some extent, the purpose of the examination.

Kennedy did not answer, probably preoccupied with theories which I could see were forming in his mind.

The library was a huge room of greater length than breadth. At one end were wide French windows looking out upon the garden and summer house. The door to the hallway and living room was very broad, with heavy sliding panels and rich portieres of a velours almost the tint of the wood-work. Between the door, situated in the side wall near the opposite end, and the windows, was a magnificent stone fireplace with charred logs testifying to its frequent use. The couch where Stella lay had been drawn back from its normal position before the fire, together with a huge table of carved walnut. The other two walls were an unbroken succession of shelves, reaching to the ceiling and literally packed with books.

Facing the windows and the door, so as to include the fireplace and the wide sweep of the room within range, were two cameras still set up, the legs of their tripods nested, probably left exactly as they were at the moment of Stella's collapse. I touched the handle of one, a Bell & Howell, and saw that it was threaded, that the film had not been disturbed. The lights, staggered and falling away from the camera lines, were arranged to focus their illumination on the action of the scenes. There were four arcs and two small portable banks of Cooper-Hewitts, the latter used to cut the sharp shadows and give a greater evenness to the photography. Also there were diffusers constructed of sheets of white cloth stretched taut on frames. These reflected light upward upon the faces of the actors, softening the lower features, and so valuable in adding to the attractiveness of the women in particular.

All this I had learned from visits to a studio with the Star's photoplay editor. I was anxious to impress my knowledge upon Kennedy. He gave me no opportunity, however, but wheeled upon Mackay suddenly.

"Send in the electrician," he ordered. "Keep everyone else out until I'm ready to examine them."

While the district attorney hurried to the sliding doors, guarded on their farther side by one of the amateur deputies he had impressed into service, Kennedy swung the stand of the arc he had used back into the place unaided. I noticed that Doctor Blake was nervously interested in spite of his professional poise. I certainly was bursting with curiosity to know what Kennedy had found.

The electrician, a wizened veteran of the studios, with a bald head which glistened rather ridiculously, entered as though he expected to be held for the death of the star on the spot.

"I don't know nothin'," he began, before anyone could start to question him. "I was outside when they yelled, honest! I was seeing whether m'lead was getting hot, and I heard 'em call to douse the glim, an'--"

"Put on all your lights"--Kennedy was unusually sharp, although it was plain he held no suspicion of this man, as he added--"just as you had them."

As the electrician went from stand to stand sulkily, there was a sputter from the arcs, almost deafening in the confines of the room, and quite a bit of fine white smoke. But in a moment the corner of the library constituting the set was brilliantly, dazzlingly lighted. To me it was quite like being transported into one of the big studios in the city.

"Is this the largest portion of the room they used?" Kennedy asked. "Did you have your stands any farther back?"

"This was the biggest lay-out, sir!" replied the man.

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